

BLIND MUSICIANS

Stanley Johnson

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disinterested that ever lived. M. de Molin thinks that all his peculiarities are due, first, to the fact that he was a financier, and second, to the fact that he was not married. We leave it for others to discuss that matter. Certain it is that he did his share in attempting to correct

in some measure the injustices of human destinies—more than can be said of many of us—and if there are other ways of shining in this world, the one chosen by the odd Baron de Montyon is not the most contemptible after all.

Albert Schinz.

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THE ORCHESTRA OF THE PERKINS INSTITUTION

The most widely known blind orchestra in the world. Playing only classical music, this orchestra fills the largest theatre in Boston.

BLIND MUSICIANS



ANY of us have derived our ideas of blind musicians from the pitiable mendicant of the streets, who draws a melancholy sound from some battered instrument—generally a superannuated hand-organ—and sometimes levies on our small change. There is a wide distance between this beggar and the performers of some of the American institutions devoted to the education of the blind, who not only aim to interpret the symphonies of Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn and Schubert, but, in the opinion of authoritative

musical critics, have challenged comparison with the finished achievements of our best orchestras of seeing musicians.

If Boston may still have a valid claim to being the "musical centre of America," the opinion of her two leading critics on the work of the orchestra of the Perkins Institution for the Blind should be convincing. After attending an annual concert given by this institution Mr. Louis C. Elson wrote that "even the intricacies of a fugue, or the most complex contrapuntal passages, are unravelled by a blind pupil almost as easily as if he were able to read the printed notes of the well-tempered clavichord." Speaking of the ren-



THE BARON DE MONTYON

social problems is indicated also by the prize given to the parents of two large families, one of nineteen, and one of twenty-one children.

The name of the first founder of a "prix de vertu"—who has since been imitated by many liberal donors—M. Montyon, is well known. But few think it worth while to inquire further, taking it for granted that a man who proposes to reward virtue must be a most uninteresting personality. But the prejudice is wrong. M. Montyon is a picturesque character. His biography has been written several times, and, again recently, some of his rather amusing business adventures have tempted the pen of M. A. de Molin.

Montyon was one of those French noblemen of the eighteenth century who, although devoted apparently to the old social organisation and faithful servants of the king, were thoroughly in sympathy with the spirit of sentimental idealism inspired by the writings of Sterne, Richardson, Rousseau to the generation of men who prepared the

French Revolution. Himself a laureate of the French Academy for his "Eulogy of the Chancellor Michel de l'Hospital," an impersonation of all the noblest qualities of humankind, he decided to foster similar virtues among men, by establishing two prizes to be awarded by the French Academy every year, one for the book which seemed "most useful for the temporal welfare of humanity," the other the first famous "prix de vertu." When the Revolution swept away the Academy (1790), Montyon himself fled first to Switzerland, then to London. When the kings came back, he did, too, and in 1819, by testament, he reestablished his two prizes, at the same time bequeathing his very large fortune (much larger than he knew himself) to philanthropic institutions. A quaint man he must have been, full of contradictions, for he left wherever he went the souvenir of an utterly disagreeable nature but of the most kind-hearted of men; petty, mean, hard in business transactions, but magnificently generous in his gifts; a most dreadfully egoistic creature, but yet at other times the most

dering by this orchestra of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, Mr. Philip Hale, of the *Boston Herald*, wrote that "the results obtained were surprisng, well-nigh incredible, and in the performance there was often a grace, a finish that older orchestras composed of men more kindly treated by nature might envy."

This Boston institution has for years been building up its music department under the direction of Mr. Edwin L. Gardiner, until it has taken a leading place in this important branch in the education of the blind. The orchestra includes performers of both sexes, and consists of six first violins, five second violins, three violas, four violoncellos, two contrabasses, two flutes, two oboes, two clarionets, two bass-clarionets, three horns, two trumpets and a pair of tympani. Their public appearances in the largest theatre in the city are eagerly attended by the best class of Bostonians.

The achievements of the New York Institution for the Blind are equally as amazing, and certainly more convincing evidence is given of the remarkable possibilities for blind students in music. No one in this generation has contributed more toward making the blind independent than Mr. William B. Wait, who for nearly half a century has been the principal of this school. In music, especially, this school has aimed to measure its ambition by the highest standards, and has subjected its students to the examinations of the American College of Musicians of New York City, unquestionably the highest criterion of scientific training in music in this country. To secure diplomas from this college the candidates must pass examinations in notation, music history, harmony, counterpoint, terminology, æsthetics, acoustics and orchestration.

In spite of their handicap of blindness the pupils of this school have competed on even terms with their seeing rivals in this college, with wonderful success. It would almost convince one that in order to study music with brilliant success it were better to take up the work blindfolded and according to the methods used by these pupils. Since adopting the tests of the American College of Musicians, 51 of the pupils of the New York Institu-

tion for the Blind have passed 240 examinations, 225 on theoretical subjects and 15 demonstrative (9 organ and 6 piano). Thirteen of these successfully passed all the tests necessary for associateship, and 2 secured fellowship credentials. Five of them won "honours," for which a general average of 90 per cent. or more is re-



A BLIND SOLOIST

quired. The work of last year shows that the work is growing. Seven passed in counterpoint, five receiving honours; one passed in acoustics, and another completed the requirements for associateship by passing the piano demonstrative tests. The associateship honour places one in the class of the most proficient musicians; the requirements demand a suc-



THE SENIOR CHORUS IN THE NEW YORK INSTITUTION FOR THE BLIND



CHORUS OF THE NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL AT BATAVIA, NEW YORK



THE KETTLE-DRUM OF THE PERKINS ORCHESTRA

cessful written examination in seven subjects relating to theory, a demonstration of technical skill at the piano or organ, and the performance of master compositions selected from the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Hiller, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt. Miss Hannah A. Babcock, the director of this department in the New York school, with her staff of assistants, has undoubtedly put her work on the surest foundation, and to those pupils who possess any musical gift can practically insure the needed training to secure a competency that will compare favourably with that earned by seeing people in the same line of activity.

Such results are not obtained without the most painstaking endeavour on the part of both pupils and teachers, and the process which makes a trained musician out of a blind child—often defective in other ways—is most interesting. A great many years ago a French naval officer, Charles Barbier, conceived an idea that gave a new impulse to the education of the blind. The French naval

signal code was composed of huge dots on the surface of flags to denote the various manœuvres of the ships. It occurred to him that by embossing "points" on the surface of paper it would be possible to devise a written language for the blind that would enable them to read more readily with their fingers than is possible with "line type," and through the economy of space greatly reduce the expense of publications.

Barbier was not a teacher of the blind, but Louis Braille perfected the system, and now the children of the schools are taught to read in braille, the name given to it in honour of the man who adapted it to their use. But the most remarkable fact is the adaptability of this system to the notation of written music, so that the pupil, by the touch of the finger, is able to interpret a composition from the arrangement of the embossed dots, there being, of course, as many groups, or "cells," as the notation requires.

It may be readily understood that in some respects the blind have the advantage of ourselves, inasmuch as the same

ment of the ability to read music and to perform the difficult compositions of the masters is far more arduous. It is a noteworthy fact that blind persons are almost invariably of a sunny, optimistic temperament, while those who are afflicted with absolute deafness are inclined to be morose. It is the resistance within the electric light bulb that causes its brightness, and it may be possible that this interesting phenomenon in matter may have its psychological counterpart in a blind person who has so much to contend with. The teachers of the blind invariably testify to their determination and persistence.

It is therefore very desirable that greater importance be given to music in all schools for the blind than is the case in seeing schools. Before the general use of braille, the teaching of music was chiefly by "rote," and learning in that manner is never intelligent in music or anything else. In the orchestra work each learner had to have his part read over and over to him before he had mastered it. Now, with a sheet of music written in braille in his lap, the blind student may feel his way until he has mastered the piece.

As soon as a blind child is started in the kindergarten his musical education begins, and he is a long way on the road before he is promoted to the higher grades. They begin by learning to distinguish tones, and if there is a foundation of talent, however small it may be, the work is continued until they can perform creditably on the piano, and possibly upon another instrument. In the kindergarten of the Perkins Institution there is an orchestra, and on festival days they regale their friends by rendering a kinder symphony with great credit and delight to themselves, as well as to their visitors.

Vocal music is given equal attention, and there are daily singing classes, where the training is undoubtedly more thorough than can be given in the public schools. In the kindergarten a specialty is made of two- and three-part songs, and by the time the blind child is ready to enter the grammar grades his future as a musician is practically determined. If there is little expectation that it will be

of pecuniary value to him it will be abandoned, for great stress is given in all schools for the blind to give them some accomplishment that will aid in making them independent bread-winners. Possibly there is some ear for music, but the gift is not sufficient to warrant the continued training to produce the finished musician, and the pupil will be given over to the piano-tuning department, which has given to so many blind the means of making themselves independent.

In the higher grades the most promising pupils are given special attention. There are classes in harmony, and if the bent of the individual is vocal, an effort will be made to do everything to perfect the nature-given talent. In Boston and New York a good deal of time is devoted to reading about music—the lives of the master composers, and any articles in the magazines and newspapers bearing on the subject. In Boston the work of stereotyping the best music into braille is constantly going on, the work having been greatly aided by two inventions of Mr. Wait, of the New York school, the stereograph and the kaleidograph. There are now on the shelves of the Perkins Institution over 1,900 plates, representing the most complete collection of high-grade music possessed by any institution.

The great American question, "does it profit a man?" may be given an affirmative answer when applied to the intrinsic value of the effort to produce income-earning musicians of blind boys and girls. The graduates of the musical department of the Boston school of the past few years have found the fact that they are blind no bar to the acquirement of an honest livelihood. Several of them are employed by piano manufacturers as tuners for their instruments, some are organists in the churches or have charge of the choirs, others are in the concert field, and many are teachers. The New York school has probably graduated its students with a better equipment for useful and remunerative work, owing to the standard of requirement already mentioned. Two of these, at least, have been the founders of successful schools of music; there are many church organists and choir-masters, and a few have be-



TRIO OF THE ORCHESTRA

come composers of pieces which have met with popular favour on their own merits.

Music, while it is only one of the many useful branches taught in blind schools to-day, comes nearer to placing the blind on an equal basis with those blessed with sight. Yet the equality is more in the

attainment than in the ease in attaining, and an added evidence that there is much we may learn, in the appreciation of our own blessings, if we will observe their patient persistence in making the best of their lot, and the kindly tenderness of their teachers in helping them along.

Stanley Johnson.



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